

Jeffrey Kastner, 'Christopher Knowles: Gavin Brown's Enterprise',
ArtForum, September 2004

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"Christopher Knowles," wrote John Ashbery in 1978, "at the age of nineteen, without exactly meaning to, has become a major figure of the New York avant-garde." For viewers encountering the artist's work for the first time in this engaging survey--the forty-five-year-old's first solo since 1988, which features a selection of his figurative oil-marker drawings, modest object arrangements, and typed text and image works--Ashbery's description is a helpful prologue. It drops clues to the story of an outside who, for thirty years, has cut a distinctive path through that most "inside" of social environments, the contemporary-art world. That Knowles has done so "without exactly meaning to" is part of the reason that his work is so intriguing.



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled (Self Portrait #1)*,
1985, ink on paper, 13 x 10".

Curator Matthew Higgs's exhibition notes explain how a prenatal condition left the artist with a form of "neurological damage" that contributed to his "complex relationship with written and spoken language." Yet despite his condition, Knowles has hardly lived the life of an isolate. In the early '70s, theater director Robert Wilson heard the boy's poetic sound recordings through a mutual friend and drafted the fourteen-year-old into an impromptu onstage appearance in *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973), the beginning of an ongoing collaboration between the two men involving writing as well as performance. And Knowles's signature "Typings"--works on paper that involve idiosyncratic uses of language and simple designs produced on an electric typewriter--were published widely in the mid-'80s.

Yet despite such indicators of status in the art world, what emerged from the recent exhibition was a compelling picture of a man very much in his own world. *Sunshine Superman* (1987), a fifteen-minute film about Knowles made by Richard Rutkowski, depicts the artist engaged in activities that suggest the roots of the seriality, repetition, and obsessive particularity of his practice. It documents Knowles's project of taping and categorizing his favorite pop songs (such lists also figure in many of his typed works) and shows him carefully arranging toy figures according to color (an impulse toward typological ordering recapitulated in a pair of mid-'80s sculptures made from stacks of colored paper). And, always, we see him typing, producing pages of minimal forms like windows and grids. There are also bursts of free-form language, which include everything from a disjointed paean to radio DJ George Michael to a scrolling list that proposes an abstruse connection between the artist, Brady Bunch star Christopher Knight, and actor Christopher Reeve (here renamed "Reeves"). There are also numerous moments of unexpected poetry, as in *Untitled (Say the Word Which Rhymes)*, 2004, which begins: "What in the world/What is all of this? / Well it is the way of time / Well, let's get on with it."

To its credit, Higgs's show never seemed in thrall of Knowles's difference." Yet there's no denying that the championing of functional limitation as a form of creative exceptionalism plays out a wish-fulfillment scenario for the art world. Free from the artifice that colors even the most sincere art, Knowles represents the uramateur, whose intuitive approach and apparent lack of ambition are both touchstone for and bete noire of the professional. Knowles's work is genuinely charming, but a show like this says as much about its curator as it does about its subject. Higgs and Gavin Brown's decision to pair Knowles's oeuvre with Jeremy Deller's *Uses of Literacy*, 1997--a project with which Higgs has also been involved featuring amateur artwork by fans of a Welsh band, the Manic Street Preachers--paints a picture of a curator on a quest, searching for authentic passion along the margins of an art world that craves extreme emotion yet remains squeamish about true love.